

Problem Gambling

Missouri's unique voluntary exclusion program for problem gamblers was created in 1996 in response to a request from a citizen to be banned from the casinos because he found himself unable to control his gambling.⁴⁰ The Commission first proposed a program whereby it would require all the casinos to ban individuals who identified themselves as problem gamblers.

This proposal spawned a spirited reaction from mental health treatment professionals from around the country. The treatment professionals commented that, while they understood the Commission's good intentions, the rule as proposed did more harm than good. Their comments suggested that the only way for a problem gambler to achieve long term recovery is for them to acknowledge that they have a problem and to take personal responsibility for it. The counselors contended that the Commission, by suggesting that it could require gaming operators to keep the problem gamblers out of the casino, was allowing the problem gambler to pass their problem on to someone else. Such a belief relieves the problem gambler from taking personal responsibility for their condition.

The treatment professionals advised the Commission that such a course of action is doomed to fail because the condition is not being treated. Furthermore, they felt that the Commission was creating false hope in suggesting that it could prevent keep the problem gambler from entering the casinos. The determined gambler will always find a way to circumvent the system. The theory is backed up by a Harvard University study commissioned by the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC) found that about 1.6% of the population will suffer from pathological gambling.⁴¹ To try to identify and prevent entry of this small percentage of casino patrons is a task that is fraught with difficulty and destined for failure.

Based on the comments from the treatment professionals, the Commission revised the rule and initiated the program consistent with their advice. The program now provides the problem gambler with a mechanism to step forward, acknowledge that they have a problem and agree to take personal responsibility for it. Under the provisions of the program, the problem gambler agrees to accept the responsibility of staying out of the casinos. They agree that it is not the responsibility of the casinos or the Commission to prevent them from entering the casino. They agree that if they are discovered, they will be arrested for trespassing and will forfeit any chips, tokens and electronic gaming credits in their possession at the time of their arrest.⁴²

⁴⁰ The program is formally called the List of Disassociated Persons. The provisions of the program can be found at 11 CSR 45-17 et. seq.

⁴¹ National Gambling Impact Study Commission, Final Report.

⁴² There is currently no specific statutory provision that authorizes the Commission to require forfeiture of chips, tokens or electronic gaming credits in the possession of problem gamblers who have voluntarily banned themselves from Missouri casinos. Absent such a provision, the Attorney General has refused to pursue these cases. The General Assembly passed such a provision in HB 793 last year. However, the bill was vetoed for other reasons. The Commission urges the General Assembly to pass similar language again this year. It will provide an important deterrent for the problem gambler and will help them and their families with the recovery process.

Since the problem gambler is agreeing not to go to a casino in Missouri for the remainder of their life, it only seems fair to block efforts by the gaming companies to lure them into the casinos. The program provides this protection. The Commission requires all licensees to remove persons in the program from their direct marketing lists, thus blocking enticements such as match play coupons, free dinners or free hotel visits. The Commission also directs the casinos to deny people in the program check cashing privileges and participation in player's clubs. Finally, the Commission requires all licensees to consult the list of people in the program before paying out any jackpot of \$1200 or more.⁴³

Once a person is placed on the Disassociated Persons List they can never get off. There is no procedure for removal. The reason for this policy is that those who treat problem gamblers are nearly unanimous in their belief that it is a lifetime condition and that a person is never cured but continuously recovering.

The voluntary exclusion program is not for everyone. It is not a panacea or a quick fix for problem gamblers. The vast majority of people who suffer from problem gambling will need counseling or group therapy such as Gamblers Anonymous.⁴⁴ However, the voluntary exclusion program can be an important part of an overall recovery program. Many people find that blocking the direct marketing efforts of the casino and the consequence of being arrested for trespassing if they are discovered in a casino are helpful components of the recovery process.

The Missouri Alliance to Curb Compulsive Gambling

The Missouri Alliance to Curb Compulsive Gambling was created in 1997 to educate the public on the characteristics and dangers of problem and compulsive gambling, to refer compulsive gamblers and their families and friends to free treatment through a toll-free hotline, and to prevent underage play and promote responsible gaming. This unique partnership between public, private and nonprofit organizations consists of the Missouri Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Missouri Gaming Commission, the Missouri Lottery, the Missouri Riverboat Gaming Association and the Missouri Council on Problem Gambling Concerns.

The Alliance plays a key role in Missouri's comprehensive program to attack problem gambling.⁴⁵ It sponsors the 1-888-BETSOFF hotline which provides 24 hour assistance to problem gamblers, their families, friends and coworkers. The hotline provides referrals to self-help groups like Gamblers Anonymous or any one of more than 100 counselors that have been certified by DMH to provide treatment services to problem gamblers and their families. DMH also administers

⁴³ Internal Revenue Service form W2-G is required for any jackpot of \$1200 or more. Since this form requires the patron's social security number, the Disassociated Persons List can be referenced efficiently.

⁴⁴ Gamblers Anonymous is a nonprofit volunteer organization that helps problem gamblers to recover. To obtain more information about GA meetings in your area call 1-888-BETS OFF or go to their web site at <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/>

⁴⁵ Keith Whyte, the Executive Director of the National Council on Problem Gambling has stated that the Missouri program is a model that all jurisdictions should emulate. In addition, during a discussion panel on voluntary exclusion programs at the National Council on Problem Gambling's 1999 annual meeting, Prof. Carl Braunlich of Purdue University, stated that the Missouri program is the most comprehensive, well thought out program he has reviewed.

a program that provides free counseling to any Missouri resident who suffers from problem gambling.

The Alliance also sponsored its first annual Missouri Responsible Gaming Education Week (RGEW) during August 2-6, 1999. The events during RGEW included two main events held in Kansas City and St. Louis where Keith Whyte, the Executive Director of the National Council on Problem Gambling served as the keynote speaker. In addition, a summary of current research on problem gambling was presented by Dr. Linda Cottler and Dr. Renee Cunningham-Williams of the psychiatry department at the Washington University of Medicine and members of the Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling.

The Alliance also sponsored a number of education programs for counselors and gaming industry employees. In addition, the Alliance produced an informational video that can be used in speakers bureaus and replayed for community organizations.⁴⁶ Furthermore, problem gambling issues were featured on the Lottery Minute, which is played on more than 70 radio and television stations throughout the state.

⁴⁶ If your organization would like a copy of this video, please contact the Gaming Commission at 573-526-4080 or write to 3417 Knipp Drive, Jefferson City, MO 65109 and ask for the Responsible Gaming Education Week video.



The Need for Additional Research

Although the Missouri program to attack problem gambling is recognized as one of the best in the world, more work is needed in this area. Too little is known about problem gambling and additional research is necessary. In order to make the Alliance's education, prevention and treatment efforts as effective as possible, it needs to know more about problem gambling as a mental and/or physiological condition. Therefore, the Commission asks that the General Assembly authorize a full time employee to administer the Commission's voluntary exclusion program, perform education and outreach sessions on problem gambling and conduct in-house research to help better understand the condition and adapt the Commission's programs accordingly. In addition, the Commission requests an annual appropriation of funds that will be dedicated to research of issues related to problem gambling.

